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Reading Homer's Iliad

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Reading Homer's *Iliad*

Mary Dengler

Why do we still read Homer —
Chariots speeding, warriors leaping to the ground,
Spearmen struggling near the walls of Troy,
Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra on the ramparts,
Straining toward the bloody dust,
Hair streaming, veils fluttering, torn from off their heads,
Their voices wailing in the growing dusk?

When Paris steals immortal Helen,
Spartan queen, from Menelaos' bed,
And Agamemnon takes Achilles' prize
To compensate for Chryseis, we watch
The rage of men and gods that turns them into beasts,
The sorrowing that turns them back.

Achilles' heart, divided between shepherding
And justice-seeking death, recasts the hero,
Not so much a spearman famous for his kills
As singer, scripting justice by his ship.
He'll save the Greeks, avenge their wrongs, but only
After Patroclus is dead, a bloody sacrifice
To send Achilles back to war.

Patroclus spearing Sarpedon while Zeus cries
drops of blood, Apollo stunning Patroclus
For Hector's spear, Achilles spearing Hector's throat,
Achilles' heel, in turn, the mark of Paris' shaft—
Each youth obeys his destiny, the craft of Zeus,
Conventions for the epic song.

As Troy goes down in flames and Greeks
Evacuate the Trojan horse to rape
Or take as trophy-slaves the girls of Troy,
Their infants hurled from walls to mingle in their fathers' blood,
Each image wrought in Homer's text
And in Achilles' shield
Becomes the story of our time.

Achilles is the best of men, his justice
Not for sale, his love sincere,

Immediate his reverence for the gods.
He understands the point of life—
In knowing how to die,
The need for art.
Too bad he didn't know the love
Of one just God.

And Paris, what of him and Helen,
Source of Greek and Trojan woe?
They are the price we pay for art,
The wily serpent in the heart.